



Pogsara Yia!

(Girls First!)



FINDINGS FROM THE NAVRONGO HEALTH RESEARCH CENTRE
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION ERADICATION INTERVENTION

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OLD SONG NEW TUNE

Introduction

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in traditional African societies is grounded in traditions of patriarchy. In traditional terms, FGM defines the onset of womanhood. Consequently, a woman who is not circumcised is not considered truly feminine. This view is held by members of both genders; however, it is widely assumed that male preferences and FGM beliefs are decisive influences in sustaining the practice. *Pogsara Yia!* note number three investigates this premise.

The Actors

For the twenty-two focus group sessions that were conducted, participants were selected to represent various segments of society: traditional male community leaders, women's networks, elderly women, young married women and men, and unmarried adolescent boys and girls. Participants were asked to discuss who makes family decisions about FGM, when such decisions are made, why those decisions are made, whether change is desirable or possible, and how change might be instituted.

Box 1

...if the man did not support, her daughter could not be circumcised. If your father did not give his consent, you could not be circumcised.

Female, single union

Sometimes the compound heads do not even know that the girls have gone for the circumcision. It is when they are asked to pay some fees that they get to know about it.

Chiana-Katiu male



Men are suspected to give the green light to FGM practice

What is the role of men? Husbands and fathers play specific roles with respect to this practice; discussions in focus groups suggested that fathers rarely exert pressure on their daughters, and husbands' involvement is smaller still:

Fatherly sanction. When a girl is young, her father consults a soothsayer to determine whether or not his daughter should be circumcised. However, fathers seldom encourage their daughters' circumcision; the mother typically takes initial responsibility for the practice. While it is often the father's role to give permission, in some cases, the circumcision might take place without the knowledge of the father or compound or family head responsible for payment. (Box 1).

Prerequisite to marriage. Previously, in the tradition of the Kassena-Nankana, a father became entitled to a full bride wealth payment upon his daughter's marriage only once she was circumcised. This system provided strong economic incentives to fathers.

The risks of a wife's desires. Men voiced strong opinions about the social necessity of FGM in order to curb their wives' sexual desires, thereby reducing premarital and extramarital sex and preserving the harmony of the household (Box 2). This is perceived to be necessary in a polygynous society where a woman may not have sexual access to her husband as often as she desires, and where sexual rivalry is potentially threatening to family values. Some men argued that these sexual urges, if unbridled, could even kill plants.

Husbands' concerns. Some men expressed the sentiment that circumcised brides were more likely to be wholesome and virgins. FGM is, in this context, a symbol of fidelity (Box 3).



Attitudes are changing – men now openly clap their support for FGM eradication efforts

Leadership roles. While chiefs or a council of elders cannot ban FGM, they do determine access to excisors.

A Changing Landscape

While many participants in the discussion voiced similar convictions about the dangers of female sexuality, more still believed that intercourse would be more enjoyable and exciting with an uncircumcised woman than a circumcised woman. Women and adolescent girls concurred with this shift in preferences (Box 4).

In many cases, men stated that they did not care if their wife was circumcised or not (Box 5). This admitted indifference, in combination with the increasing preference, among younger men, for uncircumcised women, herald more fundamental changes.

Box 4

Today, no man would go for a circumcised woman, because they feel they are not as exciting...

Middle-aged Nayagnia man

Most men prefer uncircumcised women especially when it comes to sexual intercourse. They claim uncircumcised women are better in bed as compared to circumcised women.

Manyoro adolescent

Box 5

When a man is going to marry a woman, who will know whether the woman is circumcised or not?

Janania old man

...the men do not care because they are not insulted [if their wife is uncircumcised]. What he needs is the vagina, and the clitoris does not block his interests, so he does not mind whether his wife is circumcised or not.

Gongnia middle-aged woman

Conclusion: Given these responses, it is evident that male decision-makers in the patriarchal system no longer view FGM as a practice that enhances the value of a marriage and the bride price. The apparent decrease in the social importance of FGM and economic value of FGM in bride wealth negotiations suggests that men may be open to the idea of change. Rather than viewing male attitudes as a problem to be overcome by community mobilization efforts, their openness to change should be viewed as a resource for the programme, with men in the vanguard of communication efforts on the need end the practice.

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